

Variation in death metaphors in the last statements by Texas death row inmates

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1. Introduction: The last statements

In the year 1982, Texas initiated the process of lethal injection as its execution method. By the end of the year 2007—in a time-period of twenty-five years—Texas had executed 402 men and three women, a modern record in the United States.

The lethal injection consists of three drugs: sodium thiopental, a barbiturate; pancuronium bromide, a paralyzing agent; and potassium chloride, a toxic agent that causes cardiac arrest. The arms and the ankles of the capital offender are tied down on an execution gurney by a so-called tie-down team. Needles are inserted to allow the drugs to enter the veins. But before one of the members of the execution team injects the drugs into the veins to start the death process, the prison warden asks if the capital offender has any final words—if he has a last statement. Most of them do: of all the 405 inmates who were executed by lethal injection between the years 1982 and 2007, seventy-six percent (308 inmates) gave last statements (Table 1):

Table 1. Executions 1982-2007 (N=405). Percentage of offenders who gave last statements (N=308) (<http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/stat/executedoffenders.htm>).

	N	%
Last statements (Total)	308	76
No last statement	97	24
Executions	405	100

These 308 last statements, published on the official website of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (<http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/stat/executedoffenders.htm>), are the starting point for this project, in which I look at the language that death row inmates use about dying just minutes before their own deaths.

Of the 308 inmates who gave last statements, 295 have been included in this analysis. In the cases of eight inmates, the last statements were not transcribed verbatim and only included a narrative description of the content: one had used “profanity directed toward staff,” one had “prayed,” one recited a “poem,” one had “mumbled,” and some had spoken “Irish” or “Spanish.” Four statements were left out because relevant background information regarding the capital offense (so-called offender information) was not available on the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) official website. And, one statement had to be left out because it had been written by the sister of the executed inmate. (The inmate himself was borderline retarded.) Table 2 summarizes the data:

Table 2. Texas executions 1982-2007. Last statement given by 308 people executed.

	N
All last statements given	308
Excluded from the analysis:	
Statements not transcribed verbatim	(8)
No offender information available	(4)
Statement not prepared by the inmate	(1)
Last statements included in the analysis	295

The remaining 295 last statements which were more or less fully transcribed, include all spoken statements (N=285), as well as prepared written statements by two inmates, and a combination of spoken and pre-written statements by eight inmates. Altogether, this last statements data corpus consists of 33,287 words (Table 3):

Table 3. Data corpus of last statements (N=295).

Spoken statements	(285)
Written statements only	(2)
Spoken and written statements	(8)
Total number of words:	33,287

The total number of words (33,287) is based on what is available on the TDCJ website. No video- or audio-recording devices are allowed in the execution chamber, which is located at the Huntsville “Walls” Unit in Huntsville, Texas. The last statements are written down, as accurately as possible, by a team consisting of three transcribers, who compare their transcriptions after the execution (Jim Brazzil, personal communication, November 2007). Understandably, the transcribers are not always able to record everything accurately; hence, the published last statements sometimes include parenthetical comments such as the following: “couldn’t understand,” “unintelligible,” “garbled,” “Spanish,” “sings,” or “prays.” However, these statements that have not been fully transcribed constitute only 6.8 percent of all analyzed statements (twenty out of the 295 statements).

In addition to the text of the last statements, the TDCJ website provides so-called “offender information.” This includes the death row inmate’s name, date of birth, race, height and weight, native county and state, prior occupation, education level, prior prison record, and a summary of the capital crime. This information provides context for understanding certain references in the last statements. The web-site also includes the picture of the offender. (<http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/stat/lastnamefirstname.htm>)

The average length of the transcribed last statements is 113 words. The ten written statements varied in length between 57 and 627 words. The longest spoken statement in my corpus was given by Gary Graham before his unusually high-profile execution: Graham’s statement was 1,268 words long. The shortest spoken statement consisted of the three simple words:

- (1) I’m ready, Warden. (Buxton, 2/26/1991)

2. Variation in reference to death

Death and dying are among the most commonly referenced semantic fields in linguistic discussions of euphemism (Barber 1975: 254-255; Hughes 2000: 43-43; Mey 2001, 33-34; Palmer 1972: 323-324; Salomon 1966: 32). This universal yet highly taboo end of everyone's worldly existence has produced a proliferation of metaphors, roundabout expressions, and slang terms that attempt to sooth the sorrow or veil the approach of the inevitable. Speakers and writers resort to the use of euphemisms, "roundabout, toning-down expressions such as [...] 'pass away,' 'go to sleep,' or 'depart'" for death (Algeo and Pyles 2004: 235) when they wish to blur the connections between words and their real-world referents. This kind of semantic engineering has the purpose of the interfering between language and the real world.

In this paper, I examine the variation in the metaphors which the executed Texas death row inmates used in their last statements in reference to their death—life after execution, their victims' deaths, and the pending execution process. My research questions are the following: How does the perspective change the language? How do the offenders refer to their own deaths, just moments away? How do they refer to their victims' deaths, especially when the victims' families are witnessing the execution? And, how do they refer to the immediate execution itself?

Within this framework, I will investigate which factors seem to govern the choice of expression. The analysis of the last statements reveals three main patterns:

1. In reference to their afterlife beyond the impending execution, figurative language, often in the form of religious metaphors, prevails.
Example: *Remember that today I'll be with Jesus in paradise.* (Bogges, 6/11/1998¹)
2. References to the capital crime (murder or killing) are void of figurative language. Euphemisms in the form of vague expressions or circumlocutions are common.
Example: *I am sorry for what I did.* (Kitchens, 5/9/2000)
3. If the execution process, to immediately follow the last statement, is referred to, the language used for it is either vague or direct.
Example/Vague: *[D]o what you have to do.* (Gribble 3/15/2000)
Example/Direct: *Go ahead Warden, murder me.* (Pippin, 3/29/2007)

The speaker perspective, audience, and purpose determine whether ameliorative figurative language, vague euphemism, or pejorative directness is deployed. Both the use and avoidance of figurative language in these data involve highly manipulative, rhetorical functions. The objective of the study is to increase our understanding of how this manipulation happens, e.g. what linguistic forms and what lexemes are associated with death, depending on the speaker perspective. The last statements provide a highly regulated and controlled speech situation, in which it becomes possible to investigate

¹ The references after the examples are to the last name of the person executed and the execution date.

how variation in expression is used to provide different interpretations of the world (cf. Millward 1996: 127)—and, in this case, the afterlife as well.

The conceptual metaphors (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980) employed in the last statements with reference to death have been extracted manually. Searches with words such as *death*, *die*, *murder*, and *kill* yield the instances of non-metaphorical and non-euphemistic language. All 295 statements in this 33,287-word corpus have been analyzed manually to find the various circumlocutions and idioms that reference death and the afterlife.

2.1. Reference to the afterlife following execution

References to life after death play an important role in the last statements. The inmates' phrases in reference to their own immediate death are highly euphemistic, and religious metaphor is often used as a tool. The vast majority of the metaphors are of the form DEATH IS A PLACE: The inmates are not going to 'die'; they *go to a better place* (2a, b) or *a beautiful place* (2c):

- (2) a. I am going to a better place. (Carter, 5/18/1998)
- b. Keep your heads up and know I will be in a better place. (Brown, 7/19/2006)
- c. I'm going to a beautiful place. O.K., Warden, roll 'em. (Cuevas, 5/23/1991)

Most frequently the place where the execution 'transfers' the inmate is HOME (3a, b). HOME as a metaphor for afterlife appeared altogether forty-five times in the last statements:

- (3) a. ... now I am coming home. (McFarland, 4/19/1998)
- b. I am going home to be with God. (Wilson, 5/4/2006)

Another variant of the death metaphor is DEATH IS SLEEPING (4):

- (4) I wanted to let you know that the Lord Jesus is my life and I just want to go. I'm gonna fall asleep and I'll be in his presence shortly. (Pyles, 6/15/1998)

Allusions to religion are often present; DEATH IS BEING WITH JESUS:

- (5) a. Thank you, Lord Jesus receive my spirit. (Rodriguez, 6/20/2007)
- b. I am going to go and see Jesus tonight ... (Mays, 9/24/2002)

As in (4) above, the inmates often use combinations of metaphors: sleeping and being with Jesus. The following is an example of a rarer metaphor (EXECUTION IS PAROLE), combined with the more usual DEATH IS A PLACE (HOME) and DEATH IS BEING WITH JESUS:

- (6) Warden, just give me parole and let me go home to be with the Lord. (Mays, 9/24/2002)

The concept of pardon is evident in (7) as well:

- (7) I am going to be free, I am going to Heaven. (Hinojosa, 8/26/2006)

Example (8) is one of the rare humorous metaphors referring to the desire to leave the (prison) life (PRISON/LIFE IS A POPSICLE STAND), albeit through the execution. This example also shows a relatively infrequent use of the non-metaphoric, non-euphemistic words *die* and *dead*. Yet, the example includes a religious reference as well:

- (8) Yes sir, Warden Okay I've been hanging around this popsicle stand way too long. Before I leave, I want to tell you all. When I die, bury me deep, lay two speakers at my feet, put some headphones on my head and rock and roll me when I'm dead. I'll see you in Heaven someday. That's all Warden. (Douglas, 4/20/2005)

Example (8) above illustrates some of the variation of how death is referenced in the last statements.

2.2. Reference to the capital crime victim's death

The last statements often include a reference to the crime victim's death. Inmates may address the victim's family members, who in many cases witness the execution. These references appear in conjunction with phrases of apology.

Religious metaphors are almost completely lacking from these references. What is found, instead, is euphemism achieved via vagueness:

- (9) I'm sorry about the situation that happened. My bad- everybody is here because of what happened. (Gutierrez, 3/28/2007)

Even though Gutierrez in (9) is taking responsibility for his crime (*My bad*), he simultaneously suppresses his own agenthood: the *situation* merely *happened*. In the crime summary, however, Gutierrez is clearly assigned agenthood: "Gutierrez and [...] two co-defendants murdered a 40 year old Hispanic male during a carjacking" (<http://www.tdcj.state.tx.us/stat/gutierrezvincent.htm>).

The suppression of agenthood is easily accomplished with the passive construction (cf. Halmari 1999; Halmari and Östman 2001):

- (10) To the victim's family, I'm sorry for what was taken from you. (Etheridge, 8/20/2002)

In a number of occasions, however, the inmate assumes agenthood for the murder:

- (11) I'm sorry, I did not know the man but for a few seconds before I shot him. (Moore, 1/17/2007)

Religious figurative language is missing from the references to murder victims' death or their afterlives. Even though the inmates frequently depict their own afterlives in religious metaphors, references to the victim as being 'home with Jesus' would not seem appropriate, especially in the presence of the victim's family. If the crime victim is mentioned in the last statement, this mention collocates with an apology, and any religious metaphors would imply that the victim is, in fact, 'in a better place'; this would in effect belittle the serious consequences of the capital crime. The apologizing inmate does not intend to imply this.

A first-person perspective seems to be the prerequisite for the use of religious metaphors with reference to the afterlife. The following example, however, does make a reference to the murdered girl, Amy, *on the other side* and is an example of the metaphor DEATH IS A WALL:

- (12) And if I see Amy on the other side, I will tell her how much you love and miss her and we will have a lot to talk about. (Robert 2/8/2006)

2.3. Reference to execution

In example (6) above, the inmate refers to the act of execution using the PAROLE metaphor. In general, these references to the immediate execution, the concrete act committed by the state, are mostly missing from the inmates' last statements. When present, these references vary in their form and content; however, resorting to metaphor in the reference to the act of execution, which is going to happen within a matter of minutes, is less common than in the references to death, the outcome of the act of execution. The following three references to the lethal injection are representative: (13a) is vague, but no metaphor is employed; (13b) is explicit and hostile and does not resort to a metaphor either; (13c) employs the familiar metaphor DEATH IS A PLACE (HOME):

- (13) a. I'm done, let's do it. (Lamb, 11/17/1999)
b. They are killing me tonight. They are murdering me tonight (Graham 6/22/2000)
c. I'm ready Warden, send me home. (Atworth, 12/14/1999)

Both Lamb in (13a) and Atworth in (13c), in their use of imperative verb forms (*let's do it*, *send me home*), assume an temporary control over a situation that they ultimately cannot control (cf. Charteris-Black 2008). Both forms are euphemistic, but in different ways. (13a) uses a generic verb *do*; (13c) resorts to a metaphor with religious overtones.

The following examples are interesting oxymoronic combinations of execution as murder and death itself as a PLACE where life continues:

- (14) a. Go ahead Warden, **murder me**. Jesus take me home. (Pippin 3/29/2007)
b. See you on the other side. Warden, **murder me**. (Jackson 2/7/2007)

In examples (14a) and (14b) the act of execution is not metaphorized—it is *murder*. The imperatives (*murder me*, *take me home*), again indicate an attempt for control from a totally powerless position.

The use of any kind of humor in the last statements is rare; it is used by only a handful of inmates. Examples (15a) and (15b) illustrate this:

- (15) a. Kick the tires and light the fire, I am going home to see my son and my mom, I love you and God Bless you. (Hinojosa 8/17/2006)
b. Scooter, get the beer and get in the truck, take me home baby, we got a party to get ready for. (Hafdahl, 1/31/2002)

Another handful of inmates abandon the use of metaphor—religious and humorous—and call things with their real names: execution means that the inmate *dies*:

- (16) Only the sky and the green grass goes on forever and today is a good day to die. (Martinez, 7/28/2005)

3. In sum

The vast majority of inmates use conceptual metaphors to refer to their impending death, and these metaphors fall into clear patterns. Most metaphors express death as *going to a better place*; however, variation in the form and content of the metaphor does occur. The last statements represent a highly constrained speech situation, with the speaker tied down on a gurney within moments of his own death. In this situation, figurative language provides a coping mechanism for the speaker. The fact that the content of the metaphors varies is evidence of varying coping mechanisms employed by death row inmates.

This variation does not, however, seem to be in any way connected with the inmate's age, social class (most are lower class), color, or time spent on death row. Religious metaphors referring to the afterlife, however, appear to coincide with seemingly genuine remorse and apologies to the victim's family.

Reference to the death of the victim is a common theme in the last statements. The inmate speaks directly to the victim's family and apologizes. No metaphors are used for the death of the victim; inmates refer to these murders or killings that they themselves have committed in vague and general terms. They wish to remind neither themselves nor the victim's families about the disturbing details which are revealed in the crime summaries.

References to the lethal injection process itself take two main forms, depending on how the inmate feels about the execution. Claiming their innocence, some are bitter and call the execution murder; some have found peace and refer to the execution in vague phrases (*this process*) or contentless deictics (*this, it*).

The conceptual metaphors used of dying and the afterlife are indicative of the worldviews of large numbers of Texas death row inmates. During their years on the death row, many find religion. This is reflected in the figurative language of their last statements, and, in fact, when the inmate believes in the afterlife, the figurative language which they use to describe it ceases to be a metaphor.

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